



Smith, H., & Sharley, V. (2016). International placements: learning from a distance. In A. Bellinger, & D. Ford (Eds.), *Practice Placement in Social Work : Innovative Approaches for Effective Teaching and Learning* (pp. 21-37). Policy Press.

Peer reviewed version

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Chapter 7: International Placements: Learning from a Distance

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Introduction

These reflections were compiled following a three-month international social work placement in 2010. One of the authors, Victoria, was located within a Women's Refuge in Napier, New Zealand, working predominantly with a group of Māori women and children. Victoria was supported via video-conferencing by her tutor, Hayley Smith. The placement was assessed on Victoria's return to the UK, through an observed presentation to academics, students and practice educators.

Drawing on the principles of auto-ethnography, this chapter focuses on understanding the relationship between self, others and the concept of cultural identity (Chang, 2008). It explores the multiple layers in the authors' consciousness to connect the personal to the cultural, firstly through their outward interpretations of the social and cultural aspects of their experiences, and then inwardly examining the impact of the relationship to self (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The authors present individual narratives from tutor and student perspectives that are not only confessionally emotive, but are intrinsically connected with each other's learning journey.

The structure encourages readers to interpret the authors' creative expressions for themselves, offering a narrative that transcends personal experience to engage in a cultural interpretation of relationship-based practice education (Chang, 2008). The chapter focuses upon three themes: *isolation*, *the changing nature of the relationship*, and *shared learning and reciprocity*. These themes were drawn from the authors' reflective 'letters to self', written independently after completion of the placement and reorientation of the student to the university. Each theme begins with an extract from both the tutor's and student's 'letter to self'.

Theme 1: Isolation

Victoria: *'I don't believe you are the least bit aware of the magnitude of what you are thinking about undertaking...You are placing yourself for three long months in an area you are barely*

familiar with, living and working with strangers of a vastly different cultural upbringing, and doing so alone. That said, the being alone part will actually materialise in being the largest factor that allows you to grow as an individual more than you imagined possible. The usual product of years of experience and learning – squeezed right down into a few mere months. It is just magical.'

There was a sense of extreme isolation that manifested during my international placement in New Zealand which acted as a significant catalyst in progressing my learning. This came as a real surprise given that my placement was in an English-speaking country which was already very familiar to me from a tourist perspective. My identity as a White Western female located my position within the cultural minority – not only in the women's group, but within the agency's workforce which was representative of the service-user demographic.

As time passed it became evident that New Zealand English held many mysteries, with the connotation of words often leaving me without the assumed sub-text from my own cultural upbringing. This resulted in 'talking past one another' in practice, naïvely stuck in ineffective communication where I was unable to overcome the cultural dissonance (Metge and Kinlock, 1978; Metge, 2010). Consequently, my contributions to group work were often ignored or dismissed by participants. My accent and British intonation not only caused an additional obstacle, but were also interpreted by the group as an indication of personal wealth and educational privilege. This left me feeling incredibly lonely, isolated and misunderstood by those around me.

Throughout the three months I was challenged by assumptions about, and perceptions of, me in a post-colonial country. I experienced emotional solitude at personal, cultural and structural levels (Thompson, 2010). This created a feeling of intense division, not only from the people with whom I practised, but also from anything of familiarity or fundamental understanding. A vivid memory was a sense of separation from the deep-seated cultural comprehension, where we are secure in knowing the unwritten rules and social norms that guide us in our day-to-day life (Barlow, 2007).

This isolation was not simply that of being in a foreign physical environment, or of being a solo traveller, it was more complex emotionally and compounded by the socio-political framework. The women's refuge where I was placed was a service that responded to a hidden and taboo social issue, sited at a secret geographical location in the region, and protected via a PO Box postal address (Whebi, 2009).

Retrospectively, such loneliness and separation probably began long before I found myself in placement (Pinkola Estes, 1992). As an individual I have always felt a distance from those around me. I have had a naïve desire to change the world somehow, and 'make a difference' to the lives of people in need of support, but had never really understood my driving force behind it (Whebi, 2009). I have travelled far, striving to realise this expectation and in the process experienced many cultures (Magnus, 2009). However, the identification and planning of the placement for six months prior to departure was a time-consuming and solitary process. I was anxious about what the agency might expect, my role within its remit, and the assumptions held by us both (Walker et al, 2008; Magnus, 2009). Undertaking this extraordinary learning opportunity alone and suddenly finding myself completely submerged within another culture simply magnified my feelings of peer-division in the learning community. This was particularly so when I had completed the three-month placement and returned to my familiar learning environment at the university.

My practice sensitivity is heavily entwined with my sense of creativity (Rowe, 2003). While on placement I drew upon the processes of reflective free-writing and journaling as techniques for self-evaluation when I was unable to draw upon my established support systems in the UK (Magnus, 2009). I tried to connect with my new physical environment through exploration and photography of the surrounding landscape congruent with a Māori cultural and spiritual perspective (Munford and Sanders, 2011). My aim was to construct a world-image identity when I was struggling to make sense of the socially constructed world in which I found myself (Zaph, 2005). The combination of these methods proved to be an invaluable vehicle for self-reflection. They enabled more explicit articulation of my deeper learning within this cultural context, while simultaneously offering a creative healing process for what proved to be isolating and often confusing experiences (McNiff, 2004; Magnus, 2009).

Such feelings of division, helplessness and anxiety were heavily moderated through the use of two communication strategies while in placement (Magnus, 2009): peer support and supervision with my tutor via video-conferencing. Regular video calls with another student who was undertaking an international placement in Australia offered unrivalled mutual support and deep peer comprehension of the emotional solitude I was experiencing (Munn-Giddings and McVicar, 2006). It quickly became apparent that having a solid framework of academic support to alleviate the rising sense of fear and isolation was a sheer necessity. I recall the huge significance and comfort in planned video-conferencing supervision times with my tutor and the reassurance this provided through a visual connection with a familiar face from my own culture in my home country (Panos, 2005).

Hayley: 'Remember that not all students will necessarily experience what you did when you went away to another country to work for the first time, they may feel more comfortable more quickly. Equally, I would encourage you to re-connect with that feeling of isolation and confusion about not knowing any of the "rules" when a student shares this with you.'

Isolation is a recurring theme echoed by many students who have undertaken international placements (Panos, 2005), but I wondered what that meant. I began by reflecting on my own experience of travel and re-visited what feeling isolated meant to me and whether it was part of the motivation for going overseas. There may be something deliberate in placing oneself in an unfamiliar setting as a way of confronting self in the face of isolation. Solo travel exacerbates this, generating a unique set of circumstances that stimulates our thinking in a new way (Lang and Crouch, 2009). This connection seems more profound, as we recognise that the social work task is largely working with people who are in some way isolated and marginalised (Gair, 2008).

I questioned from my own experience how isolated I had felt prior to my travels; whether I had felt displaced within my own context before I left (Pinkola Estee, 1992), then transported this feeling with me overseas in such a way that the unfamiliarity of the new context legitimised its presence; a recognition that the emotional space is validated by the geographical one.

Isolation can be defined as 'a lack of contact between persons, groups or whole societies' (Collins Dictionary, 2014); it can be tangible (I am alone here literally and physically) and it

can be invisible (I am surrounded by people with whom I have no connection). My own previous experience of not knowing 'the rules', and not having any real anchor point was something that generated its own isolation. Over time, and as the familiarity of a new setting increased, the potency of that feeling diminished. As a tutor supporting this adjustment for students, it has proved helpful (though not essential) to be able to connect personally to that place of vulnerability experienced through my own solo travels.

Lang and Crouch (2009) explore the phenomena of 'frontier' lone travel and their study produces some interesting key themes that motivate individuals to undertake these journeys. Their findings suggest that travel provides, among, other things, an opportunity for reflection; it instigates challenge (personally and professionally), and promotes reaching for self-actualisation (Lang and Crouch, 2009).

Addressing isolation is challenging; balancing support without intruding, while also recognising the needs identified. Video-conferencing offered us both the opportunity literally to see one another, and this visibility enabled me to read non-verbal cues about wellness, as well as listening to the narrative. Students similarly report that being able to see someone familiar is comforting and immediate (Panos, 2005).

Theme 2: The changing nature of the relationship

Victoria: 'Although you are aware the University's support will be limited, you haven't yet given sufficient thought to what impact this will have if things become difficult or problems arise: both personally and professionally. During the difficult times, the depth and length of the working relationship with your tutor will be crucial in enabling you to feel understood, when no-one around you holds a similar perspective at all.'

I remember a considerable shift from the didactic, micro-learning environment I had become accustomed to within the relationship. The transformation began to emerge alongside the heightened cultural uncertainty and unfamiliarity that I was experiencing in a challenging and unknown practice context with a predominantly Māori group of women and children (Magnus, 2009). The multi-faceted student-tutor relationship that developed had an

incredible impact upon the way I learned throughout the remainder of my final academic year (Gardner and Lane, 2010). Its profundity remains, and still offers me a means to approach and make sense of my life (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It provides a learning framework that continues to inform my on-going maturation and personal development (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1992; Eraut et al, 1998).

What took place was an evolution from my familiar position as a receiver of information to one of continuous reflection with my tutor. I held shared possession of the space to explore and revise the way I understood the territory, history and culture of the people I was supporting (Lyon and Brew, 2004). This encouraged my voice through reflective practice. Through the sharing of power with my tutor (Helms and Cook, 1999) I rapidly progressed from the role of 'map reader' to that of 'map maker' while being isolated within a new and uncharted global landscape (Lester, 1999 cited by Cooper, 2008). I was developing a dynamic competence to create my own map, representative of my interpretation of the situation, responsive to the cultural needs of the group I was working with (Doel et al, 2002; Williams and Rutter, 2010). This approach not only broadened my professional capability, but deepened my motivation to learn (Barnett and Coate, 2005) while also increasing my desire to apply such knowledge to my relationship-based practice during placement (Knowles, 1990; Magnus, 2009).

Having been taught by my tutor through the second year of the degree, I had some insight into the way she approached academic learning with elements of origination and imagination. This offered me reassurance and informed my expectations about our shared preference for learning through visual and artistic methods. This sense of creative association reduced the power imbalance within the relationship early on, and provided me with a bridge of consistency that enabled both our roles and our working relationship to extend far beyond the student–tutor boundaries. It facilitated a fresh educational platform where it became possible for a mutual, reflexive exchange to take place (Gardner and Lane, 2010). What occurred was an unexpected intimacy, which initially felt unusual, a little uncomfortable, and most definitely exposing (Kadushin, 1976). The relationship changed and became reflective of the new learning environment in which I found myself (Orchowski et al, 2010). It now incorporated professional and personal facets requiring a greater alliance of trust and commitment to what, at times, proved an unpredictable learning exchange (Grey, 2002).

Reciprocity, openness and trust were the three fundamental values that strengthened the bond between us (Rogers, 1990). I remember feeling completely overwhelmed when I needed to confide both personal and professional dilemmas in the same supervision session via video-conferencing even though the relationship between us was well developed. I had an overriding feeling of vulnerability through being on the other side of the world, reliant on one person to offer some sort of shared recognition fitting with my personal meaning system. My capacity to be open and honest, and trust my tutor underpinned my ability to learn effectively while in a place of geographical and emotional isolation. While I was able to increase my self-awareness, self-confidence and develop more fully as a reflexive practitioner (Barnett and Coate, 2005), I believe an absence of reciprocity, openness, trust or creative association would have left the connection faulty and mistrustful, with the organic process of development un-nurtured and unable to unfurl into its full potential.

Hayley: 'What you do well is relate to and understand their emotional place. Remember that part of your role, Hayley is to make connections with students to develop their learning and help them pull theory forward in to their practice. Again this was helpful this summer and last year, when you related this to Maslow, supporting them to meet their basic needs to enable them to move onward and upward.'

This key theme relates to the changing nature of the tutor–student relationship, which remains a challenge for me. I wondered if offering personal aspects of my experience might expose vulnerability in my confidence to offer knowledge and constructive teaching as part of the student–tutor relationship. It made me question whether this might blur the edges of the established professional working relationship (Kadushin, 1976). However, my own integrity and recognition of the essential position of self in any relationship resolutely drove me forward, as Butler et al state: 'the use of self in relationship building should continue to be central to a profession such as social work' (2007: 282).

I recognise that, in this aspect of the letter to self, I am trying to re-define the edges that are familiar and safe. I talk about 'developing their learning' and 'pulling theory forward into practice' as though they are the most important things I should do. Yet supporting students on international placements demands a move beyond that safety. Connecting with them emotionally is fundamental to providing a different kind of safety.

It is important to recognise that students undertaking international placements are trusted to manage some of the core requirements we would normally perform. This contributes to shifting the intimacy within our regular supervision, where additional aspects of professional issues and personal experience collide. Separation of these is more complicated as discussion inevitably weaves between the two – personal wellness impacting on professional understanding of situations.

On several occasions I have been left wondering which of us feels more vulnerable: the tutor supporting aspects of student self that are beyond usual expectations, or the student recognising a need to share them in order to make sense of their experience. Perhaps because we both feel this so intensely, the unfamiliar personal/professional territory might become something that unites us.

I recognise there is a danger here of over-identifying with their placement experience. However, Karpelis et al (2011: 1164) suggest a student–tutor supervisory relationship ‘significantly influences the nature of the learning environment’. This encourages me to embrace what I bring and not see it as a contaminant. One of the four key significant aspects of my role that was highly valued involved simply ‘being there’ (Bellinger and Elliott, 2011: 716), providing consistency and stability.

The changing nature of intimacy starts early in the spring term prior to departure when discussions with students about international placements raise the question of mutual trust. Part of the preparation (Magnus, 2009) involves moving out of the hierarchical place where student and tutor inhabit different spaces, and agreeing to share a new platform together, which can feel risky. I need to be able to trust what that student will do with the information we share as they do with me. It can feel like a leap of faith. The preparatory conversation sets the parameters, something Butler et al (2007: 292) suggest might be ‘both risky and exciting’.

In my letter to self, I state that part of my role is to ‘make connections’ with students, yet equally I know there is a chance I may not find one. How supportive can I be if all I do is detach myself and hold a very formal place? Implicit in this aspect of my letter is an expectation of good modelling in the relationship, something that demonstrates depth and commitment to the work. I clearly assume that I will ‘hold’ students in some way, supporting

their confidence to explore personal and professional boundaries, much as I feel I am exploring mine. To facilitate both aspects within this relationship requires that as the tutor, I offer a stable platform of personal accountability, while retaining the 'capacity to be present in the professional relationship' (Butler et al, 2007: 293). This investment and subsequent development can feel meteoric, but is only possible when both tutor and student have the courage to enter into something that is unexplored.

Each international placement will bring its own uncertainties as the variables of countries and cultures unknown clearly contribute to the unpredictability. Mason (1993) suggests we work most effectively from a place of 'safe uncertainty', therefore the tension for me as the tutor is around defining and maintaining that relative safety.

Theme 3: Shared Learning and Reciprocity

Victoria: 'You believe that your planning and preparation for the trip will carry you through the experience, keep you safe in your expectations of what the learning will be, and where it will come from – and although you think you know what to absorb and digest in advance of your departure – simply, you don't. You will be working as a professional who is accountable for your practice within an unfamiliar and complex cultural environment. It will take you to your absolute limit – and change you intrinsically as a person.'

Looking back on the experience as a whole, this final theme of shared learning carried – and continues to carry – the greatest weight in my overall professional development. This deep learning was not achieved solely because of the rich opportunity that offered unfamiliar fundamentals of 'being'; it allowed a chance to muse and contextualise alternative ways of thinking. I believe the extent and significance of the learning was directly linked to the isolation from the abundant transmission of information I was accustomed to while on campus (Light et al, 2009).

The cultural seclusion I experienced instigated a new sense of professionalism and accountability to a degree that I had not previously encountered as a student (Barnett and

Coate, 2005). I found I could not avoid the feeling of professional responsibility growing within me, reifying ownership of my learning while on placement (Knowles, 1990; Race, 2010).

This feeling continued to resonate deeply, captured in daily practice comparisons, while I shared accommodation with the refuge manager who was my practice supervisor. The presence of such an organic interchange catapulted forward my understanding about the principles of shared learning: exchanging ideas, concepts, exploring cultural representations and reflections in order to make sense of situations at personal and cultural levels (Magnus, 2009). This was further reflected at a structural level, where the absence of a linear management structure in the refuge highlighted equitable contribution in the decision-making process (Wenger, 1998).

Embracing a new model of community knowledge, I looked to the Māori culture surrounding me to encompass its core principles in my individual practice. A pivotal moment in my learning was the identification and use of a Māori genealogical concept that offered a bridge of cross-cultural understanding. This enabled me to have a meaningful connection with the women I was supporting (Metge and Kinlock, 1978; Metge, 2010). I was looking out from a position within the Māori culture. This proved absolutely key in expanding my understanding of the events in the lives of the women I was working with, as well as those in my own learning relationship with my tutor (Devo and Schlesinger, 1999; Gutierrez et al, 2000).

The working relationship between me and my tutor evolved considerably throughout my three months in New Zealand. As I became more reflective about the impact of the culture in which I was submerged, the depth and intensity of reflexive conversation between us increased, and brought with it a powerful exchange. This was in stark contrast to how, as the passive student, I had previously 'banked' information for use later (Freire, 1996).

As my placement progressed, the reflections I brought to the exchange with my tutor became more refined. I found myself beginning to look 'out from', rather than 'in to' the cultural environment I was in. I felt that our learning relationship prioritised the profundity of a shared belief system, a meaning system that superseded individualism. In doing so a space was created for a dynamic learning environment, which was supportive and encouraging (Jones, 1995).

On my return to the UK, I drew on creative and visual representations to connect international experiences to personally significant areas in the New Zealand landscape congruent with Māori culture (Suopajarvi, 1998; Zaph, 2005). My aim was to convey the notion that who I was and how I now understood the world had become strongly rooted in my overall sense of self, creativity, place and most profoundly, with the people whom I had stood beside (Spretnak, 1991, cited in Zaph, 2005; Sharley, 2012). When I was later reoriented at the university, it felt natural therefore to attempt to suffuse my cultural understandings with my learning. I sought permission for my mother, who had been a consistent and supportive figure throughout my international placement journey, to be present at my observed presentation. Initially, my tutor dismissed the request, which I found extremely frustrating. I was already experiencing confusion and difficulty resettling alongside my peers, and I was left questioning why the 'learning exchange' so preciously manifested between me and my tutor now appeared not to function effectively. My mother being there was a representation of my position within my ancestry; a piece of my own cultural identity; of who I am, and how I was beginning to understand my place in the world through another culture's eyes. Her presence that day represented the relational and familial cultural bridge to the Māori understanding of 'whānau' or wider family grouping (Love, 2008). Bringing a support person or family member to a meeting at work, an interview, or significant event is widely accepted practice in New Zealand culture. My mother's attendance formed the connection between my individual understandings of both communities. This reified my experiences from the three months as a whole, illustrating the deep sense of understanding I had achieved, while also enabling me to share this in the context of my own culture (Ruwhiu, 2008; Munford and Sanders, 2011).

Hayley: *'I think it is all too easy to undervalue what you offer by being interested and connected to the global world, enjoy the learning you receive Hayley as well as what you give, allow yourself to be open to learning with students who will educate you along the way with their journey; you don't always need to have all the answers, just be the listener.'*

This has probably been the single most valuable lesson I have learnt in my role as a practice tutor: to receive learning and not feel as though my only role was to give, to educate, or to inform. It is humbling to be taught by students and, in some ways a relief, to have permission not to have knowledge about everything.

By recognising this reciprocal arrangement we experience learning through 'engagement' rather than 'transmission' (Light et al, 2009), which enables us both to hold an element of power and authority in the relationship and value one another's contribution. When the student was overseas, I could enjoy and engage with the experience, reducing any distraction from hierarchical or academic expectations. It became a mutually dependent learning activity, modelling Wenger's 'communities of practice' where each participant teaches another; moving from 'legitimate peripheral participation' (1991: 30) to a central point of learning. This reciprocity and intensity of experience gained by relinquishing a position of perceived authority effected change for us both.

Re-positioning of self was most evident on the student's return when she asked if she could invite a family member to her observed presentation. The presentation forms part of the assessment process, exploring how the experience shapes the student's understanding of social work and how she might use it to inform practice in the UK. My immediate response to the request was to simply disregard it, believing that it was not sincere. I was distracted by culturally normative requirements of academic rigour and had lost the intimacy of the relationship we had established, simply because the geography had changed. Kadushin (1976) suggests that tutors can often revert to a more academic stance when faced with the challenge of student emotion. On reflection, the introduction of Victoria's family to the process extended that intimacy into an environment that I was less comfortable with. Perhaps the geographical distance had supported my ability to connect in this way, but bringing that back to my familiar professional world felt uncomfortable.

In fact the presence of family was a significant factor for her, and when she challenged me on the importance of family in relation to her social work experience in New Zealand, I recognised my oversight. I realised that my views of the programme and assessment requirements were fundamentally rooted in a white, Western perspective.

Cook, cited in Orchowski et al (2010: 55) suggests that: 'supervisors who are committed to training supervisees in culturally competent and ethical practice must accept and withstand feelings of vulnerability associated with their own disclosure of their racial and ethnic identity'.

As a result of this challenge, my understanding of self, as well as my implementation of our social work programme was transformed. The request was an opportunity to embrace the

cultural engagement that Victoria had experienced and use it to develop my understanding of social work in the UK. This challenged me considerably as the tutor. It also reminded me about the courage I needed to build on this shift in my position, to maintain this position of vulnerability for all placements.

Transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) is not the sole domain of students. Having the courage and humility to learn together is, I would argue, a prerequisite to supporting international placements, and challenges the conventional tutor role. This ratifies and consolidates my desire to set clear expectations for the student–tutor relationship before departure and on return. By doing so, it is acknowledged that vulnerability exists for us both, but also that there is the opportunity to share in a rich source of learning (Karpetsis, 2011). Without this, reciprocity of learning is limited, maintaining the default positions of tutor/student and potentially limiting the experience for us both.

Conclusion

The exposure to self that this international placement offered and the writing of this chapter have been significant for us both. Initially, we recognised that a pivotal learning moment had been our mutual experience, but neither of us anticipated what revelations would appear two years later when we reflected as colleagues. Supporting an international placement, and maximising learning require courage and skill as both participants engage in an environment with little experience or ability to feel ‘culturally competent’ (Laird, 2008). What we now understand is that we can apply knowledge and skills from our own context with cultural sensitivity and that this starting place can be the springboard for mutual growth. Embarking on this journey enabled us both to move from ‘map-readers to map-makers’, and was always going to require us to explore terrain that was not always predictable or comfortable, but with a belief that the investment is worthwhile.

Recognising students’ ability to teach as well as learn, enabled us both to take risks with our development. The organic shift from transmission to transformational learning (Light et al, 2009) was enhanced by the factors and variables unique to the placement setting. It was a journey across a landscape of obscure, often invisible, obstacles stumbled upon and navigated with academic trepidation because so much was unprecedented.

A lack of conformity releases a potential to be transformational (Mezirow, 2000) and reinforces that social work need not be defined by parameters of culture, nationality or location. It is not about a singular aspect of the experience originating from a binary position, such as a white Western female living and working in a predominantly black community, nor is it about comparing practice and approaches to specific dilemmas between countries. It is about utilising all aspects of self, building a relationship on foundations of trust. Employing technology through web-based supervision, blogs, or emails to enhance supervision content, can certainly support this experience but the fundamental requirement was about embracing the intimacy that this generated. At times it felt risky for tutor and student alike, but ultimately, it supported our growth.

International placements are ambitious and exposing. They are expensive financially and emotionally, but equally, fulfilling if both student and tutor yield to their teaching. The mutual sense of responsibility, vulnerability (Gingras, 2012) and equality of privilege is something neither of us anticipated, or indeed appreciated to the full, until the completion of this chapter.

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